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Toward a New Public Policy for Rural China?

Editorial

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Editorial

The stagnation of China's rural economy over the last decade has become a major challenge for sustainable development of the whole economy. With a rural population of more than 745 million accounting for 57 percent of China's total population in 2005, the country cannot afford to ignore rural issues such as restructuring the agriculture sector, modernising rural areas, and improving farmers' welfare. Ensuring a smooth transition in rural China has become the top priority in the Chinese government agenda since Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao took over the key political positions in 2003. This represents a clear departure from the previous policy followed by Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji in the 90s. The political and economic costs of the growing imbalances in the rural economy have become too important for the leadership to ignore.

Since 2004, the Chinese government has taken important steps to cope with these imbalances, such as increased budget allocations to rural education and social security, development of new social security schemes previously available only in urban areas, establishment and implementation of legal provisions to protect key resources such as agricultural land and water, and providing migrants with better access to public resources in cities. Four years after the launch of these policies, we believe it is time to analyse the evolution of the economic situation in rural China.

This special feature of China Perspectives includes several papers presented at the international conference on "Development Challenges in Rural China" held in Beijing on 25-26 October 2007, and co-organised by the University of International Business and Economics (UIBE, Beijing), the French Centre for Research on Contemporary China (CEFC), and the Groupe d'Analyse et de Théorie Economique (GATE, Lyon). The papers cover key questions related to the transformation of China's rural economy, including food security, poverty alleviation, rural-urban migration, environmental degradation, and fiscal and health care reforms. The papers are based on detailed data reflecting the diversity of China's rural economy, with some using national or nationally representative data and others providing case studies using micro-data from various provinces, including Hebei, Anhui and Qinghai.

The collection starts off with Claude Aubert's detailed analysis of grain production and consumption patterns. By reconstructing statistics from various sources, he shows that food security has been achieved in China over the last 20 years, accompanied by a dietary transition from grain to meat. This optimistic message is, however, counterbalanced by the potentially strong impact of climate change on China's overall cropping system in the long term.

Changes in household behaviours towards migration and environmental protection have shaped some of the recent evolutions in rural China. In their paper, Maëlys de la Rupelle, Deng Quheng, Li Shi, and Thomas Vendryes use a nationally representative rural household survey to analyse the impact of land use rights insecurity on rural individuals' migration decisions. They highlight important differences related to gender and according to the type of insecurity. Tu Qin, Tan Shuhao, Nico Heerink, and Qu Futian analyse how cultural differences between ethnic groups result in strong differences in economic and environmental behaviour between Mongolians and Tibetans in the Qinghai Lake area. These two papers have implications for a broad range of policy issues encompassing the improvement of rural institutions to facilitate rural-to-urban migration and fine-tuning measures targeting different ethnic groups.

Rural poverty alleviation is one of the pressing issues to be addressed. The last three papers analyse rural income and social equity. Zhou Yuan and Yang Hong show the negative impact of water reallocation on farmers' crop production and income in the Chaobai watershed near Beijing and call for a better mechanism of compensation to achieve social equity. Christian Göbel analyses how the implementation of the Rural Tax and Fee Reform from 2003 onwards has affected peasant per capita income and its distribution as well as the structure of government fiscal revenue and expenditure in Anhui Province. Using a survey carried out in central and western China, Wei Zhong evaluates the impact of an experimental medical assistance scheme, the "medical financial assistance project for the rural poor," launched in 1998 to improve health service capacity in poor areas. He highlights the achievements of the program in the utilisation of health centres by the poor but also points to its deficiencies in relaxing economic constraints.

All in all, this collection of papers raises a number of important issues regarding a new political economy in rural China. Although some key achievements in food security, increased environmental awareness, and compensation mechanisms towards the poor can clearly be identified, the contributors all point to a strong need for further effort to achieve better equity and sustainability in the development of rural China. This would entail redesigning rural institutions to ensure land tenure security, providing a social welfare net encompassing health protection and education, and reducing pressure on natural resources. These are clear prerequisites for tackling rural development challenges and alleviating rural poverty. •

Sylvie Démurger and Jean-François Huchet